

Hanryu: A Means of Participating in Koreanness

South Korea Rising

Only twenty or so years ago, South Korea conjured up lingering images of student protests and demonstrations. To an international community, general knowledge about South Korea was far from abundant, and even as the country was opening up to the world, especially after the Seoul Olympics, the average non-Korean who knew about Korea associated it not with brightness and quality but with certain shadows that came with an air of underdevelopment. In fact, a recent *New York Times* article on the emergence of Korean popular culture has described how in former years, if a Japanese television set stopped working, consumers would check to see if there was a problem with the electricity, whereas if a South Korean television set stopped working, they would immediately assume that there was something wrong with the set. Such an anecdote is telling, and underscores the level of disparity that once existed between South Korea and a country like Japan, at least in foreigners' minds.

Much has changed in the past decade. Samsung products are now desired around the world; Korean food has gained wide recognition through an increased presence in restaurants and on the streets; and Korean celebrities sport fashions that are considered smart, swank, and stylish—“kim chic,” as one journalist has called it. As a new locus of Asian cool, South Korea has become a hot tourist destination, not simply a stopover or appended excursion while visiting a neighboring country, as was previously the case.

And most recently, right here in the States, we have witnessed Psy's "horse dance" become part of the mainstream American popular lexicon.

As a Korean American, it has been both intriguing and satisfying to see Korean culture (traditional and popular) be catapulted to international visibility. Having people of diverse backgrounds ask me about the latest K-pop groups, and non-heritage learners of Korean practice their beginning-to-intermediate language skills on me has brought on a curious feeling; while I have always been proud of Korean culture and my Korean roots, it has occurred to me that all of a sudden, or at least with the rise of *hanryu* (the Korean Wave), it is a "good time to be Korean." Of course South Korea has seen incredible growth on many fronts since its globalizing efforts began in earnest in the 1990s. But it is the developments that have been made in the cultural realm, many of the fruits of which are now being manifest through the *hanryu* phenomenon, that have, to me, been the most dynamic and influential.

But what exactly is it about the streams of popular culture within *hanryu* that has made it so special? Is it simply the slick and colorful music videos, and the good looks of K-pop idols and K-drama stars that have captured audiences worldwide? Surely the vibrant infectiousness of K-pop culture can, to an extent, be attributed to the catchy hooks of energetic melodies that are so wonderfully singable. Yet there is something deeper that is working through Korean pop culture that can be related to a more traditional Korean ethos; and it is something that I see as having contributed to a continually growing fandom. This essay is a brief reflection on K-pop as a representative genre of the Korean Wave and a positive extension of Korean culture.

The Korean Spirit: Participation and Unity

Negotiating the Western value of individualism with the importance placed on collectivity in Korean culture has been a rich (and lifelong) process. That is not to suggest, of course, that lines between the two are solid or exclusive; obviously, independent identity and mobilizing as a group are an important part of both societies. But the aspect of Korean culture that has been the most meaningful and special to me, from my perspective as a citizen of both cultures, is the importance of interpersonal relationships and the value of community, expressed in terms such as *jeong* (attachment, affection) and *uri* (“us” or “our”). The bond that a person establishes with another is an important foundation on which community is built; it is a positive base for accountability and understanding. Indeed, no matter how brilliant or successful an individual might be, the need to belong still remains one of her/his most basic human needs, as psychologists and sociologists have shown. It is this dimension of Korean culture—the notion of community—that has spoken to me as a second-generation Korean American.

The idea of community can be seen in many of Korea’s traditional folk arts. For example, the art of *pungmulnori*, a genre of percussion music that flourished as a form of ritual and entertainment in the village-based agrarian society of Korea before modernization, was based heavily on the concept of audience participation. Itinerant *pungmul* troupes would raise the spirit of a crowd through performance in an open space, or a *madang*, in a village. At times known as a *pan*, the *madang* functioned not only as a physical space but also an important emotional and spiritual space where people gathered as one.

But *pungmulnori* was not merely music; it was a tradition that also included dance. As dynamic rhythms were played out on percussion instruments, dance movements, along with vocal cries of joy and encouragement, gave expression to an elevated state of excitement in both audience and performer. This heightened enthusiasm, described in traditional terms as *heung* (mirth, joy) and *sinmyeong* (spirited cheerfulness), culminated in a festive state of oneness that extended to everyone in the *madang*.

In stark contrast to a performance mounted on a stage, with a clear distinction between artist and observer, the accessible rhythms and stylized dance gestures of *pungmulnori* encouraged audience participation. That is, the performers and audience became united in the same space, with neither party worried about making mistakes or concerned with things like “artistic perfection.” Although *pungmul* performers were themselves professionals skilled in their art, a performance was considered successful only when it stirred the audience to join in; if a group’s *sinmyeong*, or “lively spirit,” was not aroused, the performance was meaningless; in essence, a dead performance. In this sense, *pungmulnori* was heavily rooted in community and communal consciousness, invoking a sense of solidarity and underscoring the *uri* through the enlivening acts of music and dance.

Another folk art that traditionally placed great importance on audience participation is the storytelling genre of *pansori*. Performed by a singer who was accompanied by a drummer, this vocal art was also, much like *pungmulnori*, once a “street performance” that was appreciated by the common people. As a *pansori* singer laid out his straw mat and began to entertain people with his tale in an open space, a crowd would gather to take part in the dramatic journey.

Although *pansori* did not blur the boundary between audience and performer quite in the way that *pungmulnori* did, audience participation was still a crucial component in building a successful performance. During the course of a *pansori* performance, a discerning audience would insert cries of appreciation, affirmation, and support to the singer as a sign of encouragement. In other words, a performance of *pansori* was not merely about the story being told by the singer. Rather, the telling of the tale unfolded within a crucial singer-drummer-audience network that was created at the moment of performance. Here again, a “good” *pansori* performance was judged not by the technique and talent of the narrating voice but by how much the audience participated through their vocal shouts of approval and identification with the story. Without these shouts (and ultimately, the solidarity and energy they offered), a *pansori* singer would find it difficult to finish his tale.

The above are but two brief examples of how traditional Korean folk entertainment placed a real and practical importance on the audience, fostering connection through inclusion and participation. A performance was never just a performance; it was about inviting people to participate, and “going together” towards a state of enthusiasm and joy. As South Korea modernized over the past century, it naturally left behind many rituals and activities that were a part of village life. Yet the idea of collective joy (as opposed to discrete, individual pleasure) seems to live on in the Korean consciousness. Korean entertainment today still has an element of invitation that keeps an important focus on the audience even as it develops its artists and stars.

Building Community: The *Uri* of K-pop

With flash mobs from Paris to Moscow and sold-out concerts at stadiums in cities such as New York and Tokyo, K-pop has in recent years proven to be a powerful force of entertainment. The high production quality of music videos and live concerts have earned the respect of fans and gained the attention of media across a range of countries. Indeed, the real appeal of K-pop can be located in its visual dimension, which does not simply complement the music but is part and parcel to it— an integral part of the performance. Choreography and dance are a crucial component of the K-pop package, and the resulting combination of replicable moves with digestible melodies makes it easy and fun for fans to follow along. In many ways, the “total entertainment” of K-pop came at a very good time, when music is not merely listened to, but watched (on sites like YouTube), as it is today.

Although K-pop is largely based on the musical language and idioms of (Euro-) American pop, there is no guarantee that it should gain acceptance in areas that have widely accepted and embraced American pop music. Once something leaves its home country, or culture, it is out of the hands of its creators and its reception is largely indeterminable. With many other factors at play, a cultural product becomes susceptible to a variety of responses and reactions. That the idols are Korean and the songs are in the Korean language is enough to make K-pop seem foreign and unapproachable to a non-Korean audience, despite its musical familiarity. Yet K-pop has managed to amass a large (and growing) base of fans from different cultures, ethnicities, and nationalities. It is here that I see the “*uri* of K-pop” being realized.

The beauty of K-pop is its accessibility and openness to audience participation. It gives fans a chance to participate in K-popping by imitating, and constantly practicing, the corresponding dance moves of a song. K-pop has shown that it is not simply a genre of pop music, but a culture all its own with intensely invested and passionate fans that are inspired to mobilize themselves voluntarily in groups – on the streets and in various festivals and campuses – in acts of dancing. The spirit of the “street performance” lives on through the K-pop flash mobs that have sprouted across the globe, attesting to the power of the audience and audience participation. But in line with the times, K-pop consumers also make their own cover versions of songs and post them on sites such as YouTube, thereby also forming a community on the web. In this way, the “K-pop *madang*,” both virtual and real, has been a crucial site where fans come together to positively share passion, joy, and a lively spirit as they connect with one another through singing and dancing.

This is not to suggest that K-pop is the modern heir to the *pungmul* troupes of pre-modern Korea, but only to show that this consciousness and power lives on through an entertainment form like K-pop; indeed it has been a crucial part of K-pop’s success, which is ultimately dictated by fans. Nor do I mean to ignore that a larger marketing formula devised by a profit-seeking Korean entertainment industry is also at work here. But even with such tactics at work, the focus on creating songs that audiences can imitate still speaks to a knowing recognition and acknowledgment of the value of audience members. Considering the significance that the K-pop idols themselves place on their fan communities, it would not be an exaggeration to say that while American pop is about the artist, K-pop is about the audience.

Embracing Koreanness Through Popular Culture

It is the audience participation, and by extension, the community-building aspect of K-pop, that has to me, been the most positive dimension of the K-pop phenomenon. The power and potential of K-pop to connect people and bridge cultures is being evinced in small ways around the globe. A recent K-pop Festival in South Korea hosted tens of thousands of contestants from over thirty countries, who came to dance for and with each other. A media report entitled “K-pop Makes All of Us Friends” described how that event gathered fans in the name of K-pop, but also how it became a time where new friendships were established. Another recent report has highlighted how K-pop has become a symbol of peace and hope among Israeli and Palestinian youth. In this historical region of conflict, youths of both nations have surprisingly found common ground through Korea’s pop music. And yet another report has recently described how K-pop is being used in some places in South America as a positive activity to help bring at-risk youths back on track and into a healthy, positive routine.

What does all this mean to me as a Korean American? It has caused me to reflect on the value of Korean tradition and to appreciate what it can offer in today’s global culturescape. K-pop and the other streams of popular culture embedded in *hanryu* have not necessarily made me “more proud” of my Korean background than I was ten years ago—that feeling has always been there. It has, though, made me more aware of the potential of the *uri* in Korean culture and its relevance in contemporary life. It has made me realize once again the power of interpersonal connections and establishing bonds, not only with those within a culture, but also across cultures. K-pop has done this in an

inviting and effective way. It has enhanced my own personal identity as a Korean American; I am both proud and pleased to be a part of this community.

In a very real sense, the coming of *hanryu* has incited a profound shift in the way that South Korea is perceived. But *hanryu*, and the K-pop that flows through *hanryu*, has done more than that. It has gathered people and fostered a new community where the sharing of joy and the generating of *sinmyeong* have led to positive connections. As I turn to study the latest K-pop song and dance, and view various covers and reviews online, I feel a sense of satisfaction that Korea is becoming known. But my appreciation runs deeper. South Korea is offering a compelling stream of pop culture that brings people together in a dynamic *uri*. And I am honored to be a participant of that *uri*.